

Early French Immigration to Peoria

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Imagine being dropped off in an area of the United States where all the land is flat, and no one is in sight except for the many Native American tribes off in the distance.

Peoria, Illinois may be the heartland of the Midwest, but it did have immigrants from many places in Europe. One of the most important immigrant groups in Peoria was the French, who greatly influenced the area. Unlike many areas in the East and in Europe, the Peoria area had very fertile soil. Because the French founded Peoria, small business and agriculture characterized the economy significantly.

Louis Joliet and Pere Marquette were two of the very first explorers to what is now Peoria, in 1673. But before they even explored the area, the Peoria area was inhabited by the Illinois Confederacy of five tribes. This area was, at the time, known as “Old Peoria.” In Old Peoria in 1691, there were four structures that were used for lodging and stores. These were the beginning of a flourishing settlement that lasted for years. After Joliet and Marquette left, Robert Cavalie Sieur de LaSalle and Henri de Tonti came to Old Peoria on January 5, 1680. But, unfortunately in 1702, conditions in Old Peoria became harsh and people started leaving the area for Starved Rock. Old Peoria was eventually abandoned in 1797, due to Indian attacks; few people remained there and lived among the tribes of Indians. The area remained that way for about fifteen years, and then was re-inhabited by the French again, in 1812. The settlement was called “New Peoria” and founded by Jean Baptiste Maillet. Finally, on January 13, 1825, the Illinois General Assembly deemed Peoria a county.

Of course, Peoria would have never been established or thrived as a county without certain people in history. Henri De Tonti was born in 1650 in France, and joined the army at age eighteen after completing school. That is where he and LaSalle came upon each other. In 1677, LaSalle went back to France to look for a fellow explorer to help him venture to Illinois. LaSalle's full name was Robert De LaSalle, and he was also originally from France. Unfortunately, at the height of his adventures and success, he was killed by his ship's crew on the way back to Peoria from an exploration. There was also Jean Baptiste Maillet, who is known for founding Peoria's permanent settlement, who was born in French Canada in 1753. The Eads family was extremely important to the area then as well. Rebecca Eads was the first French-American to the site of Peoria. Her husband, Abner Eads, was the sheriff of Fulton County, which included Peoria in 1823. He also was a trader with the Indians in the area. Other important people were John L. Bogardus, who was Peoria's first lawyer, and Dr. Augustus Langworthy, who was Peoria's first physician. A man named John Hamlin settled in Peoria in 1822. He built the first frame house, and built a flourmill on Kickapoo Creek.

It was also important to know exactly where and how the Peoria settlements came to be located where they are now. Because of LaSalle's death, Tonti, and François de La Forest followed the Indian tribe's wishes, and moved Ft. St. Louis to the Peoria area. When a United States team surveyed the area, they found that the earliest Peoria settlement was located near Cornhill and Adams Street, in the downtown area. When Peoria was first deemed a county, it included Galena and Chicago within the county.

The French originally came to expand their fur trading empire. But when Joliet and Marquette explored the area for the first time, they stayed near the friendly Indian

tribes, who allowed them to try wild oats, beans, melons, and bison meat. After exploring for a while, they later realized that the flat plains and fertile soil would be able to support vegetation that could feed a large group of people. Many small businesses grew in Peoria, most being traders or people with professions or special jobs.

The question that could be asked is, what does all of this have to do with the impact of the French on Peoria's business? Well, there was numerous ways they influenced business. For instance, if Peoria was not seen as a good place to expand the fur trade, and was not explored by Joliet and Marquette, it never would have been founded. Further, if they had not stayed with the Indian tribes and tried the crops, the French would not have thought of growing crops. Without some of the French that settled in Peoria, many techniques and equipment used for agriculture would not have been developed. John Hamlin created the first flourmill in Peoria. Along with that, he offered many jobs to people. Many people of the village also traded with the Indians to gather merchandise since there were very few manufacturers in the area. That was a major business for traders, merchants, and fur makers of that time. The location also played an important part in agriculture and fur trade. Considering the main area of the Peoria settlements around the Illinois River, the river was used for fishing and catching game to use for fur.

Because the French founded Peoria, small business and agriculture were key parts of Peoria's economy. Even though LaSalle and Tonti were supposed to expand fur trade in Peoria, they found agriculture to be extremely useful, and eventually changed the economy of Peoria. The important people and everyone who lived in the area adapted many techniques and technical advances that changed the basis of agriculture too. All in

all, without those people, the economy of Peoria would never be as well off as it is now.

[From Moore Barr, et al., eds, *Intensive Archaeological Explorations for Peoria's Eighteenth Century French Village*; Rodger Biles, *Illinois*; Janine Crandell, *Peoria Township History*. Dec. 13, 2004.

<http://www.peoriacountyillinois.info/twp_histories/peoria_twp.html> (Aug. 27, 2007); and George May, *Students History of Peoria County, Illinois*.]